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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Moving Closer! Teaching in a Polarized Society

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It was my first semester teaching about 10 years ago in a seminary. Our class of about 35 students was into the second week of the semester and I was speaking about the complicity of the United States in the attack of 9/11. In the midst of my talk a student raised his hand and I asked him to speak. He proceeded to offend me in many ways: telling me I was not from this country and that I shouldn't be in the US, much less teaching. After he was done, I was possessed by an anger that took away my ability to think. In the midst of it all I remembered that I was wearing a microphone so a student with impaired hearing could listen to my talk. I then went to the back of the class and asked the student to speak again into the microphone so the other student could hear. It was during this movement from the front to the back of the classroom that I gained some clarity. I got very close to him so he could use the microphone that was on my chest and I said, "Can you please say it all again so Mary can hear what you said?" I was so close to him I could feel his breathing. He was so surprised that he started stuttering and said only 20% of what he said the first time. And then we had to continue the class. We became opponents of each other and it was a very strange, fearful, and awkward semester.

The current political atmosphere in this country is one made of confrontation. We address each other with the goal to win the battle, and in some or many ways, to annihilate the opponent. There is a certain pleasure not only in winning an argument but in depriving somebody from their own joys. Many polarities in our society are based on the assumption that these important issues can preserve or eliminate the very possibility of life. Whites see minorities as a threat to

their social position, and even their lives; minorities see whites as owning a privilege and control of things-supremacy- that impedes them from living fully and even existing; heterosexuals see queer people as a threat to the nuclear family, 'normal' social composition and God's design; queer folks see these heterosexuals not only limiting their social rights, but also endangering their very lives. Be it race and ethnicity, economics and class, sexuality and gender, we seem to locate ourselves in opposition and from those places we fight for our very lives.

Classrooms are not exempt. Teachers and students come from the corners of those sides and may reproduce in class the same divisions experienced in society. Readings become ideological brainwashing, free speech is endangered on both sides, and taking a position offends someone. The results can be disastrous. It is not difficult to foresee uneven power discussions becoming a screaming contest with the aim being to wound the opponent. But also, there are discussions that produce silent harm in their aftermath. A friend of mine told me that her president asked faculty for ways to help her school to improve in terms of diversity. When my friend, somewhat naively, pointed out some aspects of the institution and its life that were alienating for minority persons, the discussion in the meeting skirted the issues she had raised and failed to recognize the problems. The next year, my friend didn't get tenure because the president had felt personally offended in that meeting and said he couldn't trust her anymore.

In a culture that often does not know how to deal with conflict, where offense and injury are seemingly inevitable when we discuss difference and litigation is the only vocabulary we know to solve disputes, how do we model a culture of mutual appreciation and begin to create spaces where people can speak what they need to and, at the same time, be challenged regarding what they say?

Marcia Y. Riggs in her article *"Loves the Spirit": Transformative Mediation as Pedagogical Practice*,<sup>[1]</sup> gives us wonderful tools to create a space where dialogue is fostered instead of debate. She says: "The concept of dialogue is critical to intercultural communication because it is more than simply conversation; it is communication that nurtures relationship. This is the case because dialogue is based upon mutual respect and listening and learning from one another over time; "earning such respect comes through a willingness to accept the 'otherness' of others."<sup>[2]</sup> Dialogue creates a possibility for many voices to contribute, but debate opposes one person over another. Surely, we can't go into dialogue with the naïve feeling that we need to be nice to one another. Surely we can't be unaware of the power dynamics and tensions always present in organizations and schools. Fearful sentimentalities when pronounced through pedagogies formed out of the fear of conflicts easily succumbs to other fears lurking in the space and end up avoiding the very issues that we are supposed to discuss. The same thing happens with "safe" pedagogies that tend to create safe/artificial spaces where people only speak what is "non-threatening" and the very issues at stake continue in a latent mode. We need pedagogies of courage that help us confront each other fully by creating forms of trust and recognition, offering tools and programs that do not work from fear and don't aim at simply checking the proper list of mutual respects.

Just recently I was in a classroom in my seminary where my colleague who teaches a difficult class allowed students to ask, talk, and make mistakes, fundamentally practicing honesty. Fiery conversations with fiercely made arguments can be just as fine to engage if what is at stake is an idea and not the dignity of a person, or a people. Surely ideas can put people's dignity under attack, and it can be tricky sometimes to distinguish between "mere ideas" and the dignity of a person. Especially in some subject areas. However, it is the practicing of pedagogies of courage that gives us the awareness to feel, listen and speak, or see, judge, and act. We must learn to live in rough planes of uneven ideas, disjointed and opposed worldviews and stay there, breathing within our differences with the intent of, perhaps, mutual relations. A very difficult task.

As I write this article I wonder what I would do if someone like that student of mine, who must surely be against the *Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)* program, would come to my class again. The extinguishing of this program has deeply affected me. Now that I have tenure in a very liberal institution and have a better sense of myself, would I have patience with this student? Would I be able to create a space where this student could thrive as much as he would be challenged and respected? I don't know . . . .

My ethicist friend asks me: What is teaching for? What can happen in the classroom that is important, that expands the world for students, and for us as teachers? How can we create classroom communities that practice justice in the same ways that we want our larger community (neighborhood, city, country) to be more just?

Perhaps we can try to think about our opponents not as people to be thrown away or put down (how different would I be from my very opponent who wants the same?) but rather, as part of my own wellbeing. I cannot allow myself to be reduced to my opponent in regard to their ideas and propositions. But I must know that we are made of the same human material, the same vices, horrors, joys and honors, the same desires to destroy and to build. To acknowledge the humanity in those whom I can easily despise and would enjoy seeing their demise, is the first step into this space of some commonality. For those with some power, it is getting closer that empowers us rather than running away. My people made me strong to face our enemies and I am with them for them. Without fear! I simply don't have the possibility to run away! I must face them while I don't need to eliminate them! While I can't stand the president of the United States and all that his administration is doing, I cannot just say, "Well, his term will end soon." While he is a threat to the very condition of life for my people, all the minorities, and the earth, I can't demonize him! I can't demonize him even after I read Ta-Nehisi Coates' essay "The First White President"[3] and his sharp while contestable, yet fundamental analysis of what the president represents. I can't dehumanize him even though I have enough content and rhetoric to do it easily. I cannot allow his white resentment and grievance to make me work from my own resentment and grievance. I am not spending time dealing with an anger he wants me to feel, thus preempting my criticism and action and defusing my strength. I will engage in other forms of feeling that he does not expect. I will move closer to him and I will breathe next to him a different breath! Until he moves or is moved away! In fact, he is teaching me so many things and challenging me to think in ways I had not done before. In this way, he is actually

making me feel stronger to contest him and his administration in more thorough and unforeseen ways. The weirdest thing: he is empowering me with opposite signs! I don't want to destroy him! I once heard Professor Orlando Espin say this: "You cannot free somebody by dismissing and destroying someone else." [4] So I won't do it! But if you ask me, "Can you fight this man and his administration?" I will say it out loud. "Oh yes! Oh yes, I can!"

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, recently remembered by Rev. Dr. Serene Jones and Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas: [5] "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." In order to drive a spoke into the wheel we need to get closer, even very close, to our enemies and listen to them. That is what that microphone in my neck taught me. I got closer to my student and he changed. As I also changed. It is from this closer place that we gain our strength and we are able to see somebody else's humanity. From that place we listen, agitate, contest; we confront and radically change things and people.

Perhaps the Buddhist monk *Thich Nhat Hanh*, who coined the term "socially engaged Buddhism" can help us see us in a multitude of places, names, and situations. He helps us name all of our names:

### ***Please Call Me by My True Names***

*Don't say that I will depart tomorrow—  
even today I am still arriving.  
Look deeply: every second I am arriving  
to be a bud on a Spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,  
learning to sing in my new nest,  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.  
I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
to fear and to hope.  
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death  
of all that is alive.  
I am a mayfly metamorphosing  
on the surface of the river.  
And I am the bird  
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.  
I am a frog swimming happily  
in the clear water of a pond.  
And I am the grass-snake  
that silently feeds itself on the frog.  
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.  
And I am the arms merchant,*

*selling deadly weapons to Uganda.  
I am the twelve-year-old girl,  
refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean  
after being raped by a sea pirate.  
And I am the pirate,  
my heart not yet capable  
of seeing and loving.  
I am a member of the politburo,  
with plenty of power in my hands.  
And I am the man who has to pay  
his "debt of blood" to, my people,  
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.  
My joy is like Spring, so warm  
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.  
My pain is like a river of tears,  
so vast it fills the four oceans.  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up  
and the door of my heart  
could be left open,  
the door of compassion.*

[1] Riggs, Marcia Y., "'Loves the Spirit': Transformative Mediation as Pedagogical Practice," 2016 111 E. Ott Marshall (ed.), *Conflict Transformation and Religion*, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-56840-3\_8

[2] Ibid, 113.

[3] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The First White President. The foundation of Donald Trump's presidency is the negation of Barack Obama's legacy.* [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/?utm\\_source=fbb](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/10/the-first-white-president-ta-nehisi-coates/537909/?utm_source=fbb)

[4] Dr. Espin also emphasizes that "among unequal people, if to make victims free from bondage requires to hurt the dominant abusive dictatorial oppressor, I don't have ethical problems with that."

[5] *We Condemn President Trump's DACA Betrayal*, <https://utsnyc.edu/condemn-president-trumps-daca-betrayal/>

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2017/09/moving-closer-teaching-polarized-society/>